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TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 8098

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE

RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA IMMEDIATE 4314

RUEHTV/AMEMBASSY TEL AVIV IMMEDIATE 0874

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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 DAMASCUS 001500

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TAGS: TBIO KFLU EAGR SY

SUBJECT: AS AI OUTBREAKS SURROUND SYRIA, IS SARG CONCEALING INFORMATION?

REF: A. DAMASCUS 401 B. DAMASCUS 1242

Classified By: CDA Stephen Seche for reasons 1.4 b/d

¶1. (C) Summary: Though avian influenza (AI) outbreaks have been reported in neighboring Jordan and Lebanon, Syria has not reported any suspected or confirmed cases. While local offices of organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) express confidence that the SARG would acknowledge any possible AI cases, skepticism among Syrians that Syria is free from AI increases with each new case detected in the region. Several contacts admit that it is possible that the SARG could be withholding information regarding AI in Syria, as evidenced by its control of all media and increasingly close scrutiny of AI-related media reports, now reportedly requiring approval by the Ministry of Health (MOH) and Ministry of Agriculture (MOA) prior to publication. End summary.

¶2. (C) Despite recent outbreaks of strains of avian influenza in all of Syria's neighbors - Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and the West Bank, the SARG continues to insist Syria remains the only country that does not have suspected or confirmed cases of avian influenza. Dr. George Khouri, Director of the Animal Health Department at the MOA, who traveled to the border region as a result of the AI reports in Jordan, told Post that AI rapid tests did not detect any potential cases among birds in Syria. Dr. Fouad Mujallid, resident WHO Representative, agreed with Khouri that avian influenza has not been detected in Syria, and that no suspected samples of AI had been sent to the regional laboratory in Cairo. Mujallid was unable to explain how AI could be present in every other country but Syria, though he admitted that it is only a matter of days before suspected cases would likely surface in Syria. Mujallid also reaffirmed his confidence that the SARG would report suspected cases of H5N1 to the WHO, claiming that if an outbreak were detected, the SARG would have to rely heavily on the organization for its expertise and assistance in obtaining necessary medication and supplies.

¶3. (SBU) As news of AI outbreaks in neighboring countries proliferates, an increasing number of Syrians are questioning the SARG's claims that AI is not present in Syria. Though the SARG continues to deny the presence of AI, recent eyewitness reports have indicated that large numbers of poultry have recently been culled near Qamishli.

¶4. (C) Contacts with whom we spoke uniformly admitted the possibility that the SARG has both the ability and the institutional proclivity to conceal suspected or confirmed cases of avian influenza in Syria. A physician in Damascus

stated that while she believes that the MOH could try to conceal AI-related cases, international organizations are less likely to do so. As a result, she believes that the WHO and FAO offices in Syria would eventually uncover and disclose any SARG cover-up. During a meeting with the WHO, Mujallid claimed that the SARG was "afraid of him," saying that he has made threats to PM Mohammad Naji al-Ottri to relay a negative report to WHO in Geneva if the SARG tried to hide any cases from him. When asked how the WHO would respond if it determined that the SARG withheld information on suspected cases of AI, Mujallid commented that the WHO would send a diplomatic note expressing its displeasure, but was uncertain about the extent to which the WHO would publicize the cover-up. Mujallid also emphasized that the WHO would not withhold, for example, the \$150,000 that the SARG recently requested for AI-related training and consultants.

¶ 15. (C) Press reports in the Syrian dailies regarding AI outbreaks in neighboring countries have been minimal. Ahmad Khatib, a local poultry producer, told us that this can partially be explained by the SARG's instructions to its media that all stories regarding AI required approval from the MOH and MOA to limit misinformation and panic among Syrians. Khatib indicated that the poultry market in Syria is improving due to limited poultry supply, with producers currently earning a respectable profit after months of losses (ref A). He mentioned that though the poultry supply in Syria would not completely rebound for another year, the recent upswing in the market was beneficial as the MOA had not acted on any of its promises regarding low-interest loans and tax benefits for the thousands of Syrian producers who have suffered record losses (ref B).

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¶ 16. (C) Comment: Given the large number of AI outbreaks in the region, it is unlikely that no cases of avian influenza in animals or humans have occurred in Syria. Since last October, the SARG has tried to present itself as proactive and effective in combatting the possibility of an AI outbreak in Syria. However thus far, it has not offered a reasonable explanation why AI outbreaks have occurred in neighboring countries but not in Syria. Though many Syrians do not place faith in the SARG's claims, they do trust reports from the local WHO and FAO offices. The local offices are, in turn, continually endorsing the SARG's "AI-free" message as well as its efforts to combat the disease. The SARG's decision to control AI information is typical of its short-sightedness: choosing to quell the fears of average Syrians and slowing poultry market decline, while ignoring the potential consequences the SARG would face for concealing information on AI cases in Syria.

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